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ABSTRACT

This guide outlines a course introducing university-level students to the relationships between Eastern and Western literature by studying the works of Tagore and Yeats. The guide includes: (1) a list of texts for the course; (2) the sequence of lecture-discussions, covering the authors' works, their cultural contexts, and the parallel roles they played in India and Ireland; (3) suggestions for using foreign students and faculty as resources; (4) suggestions for activities, including films, visual arts, and theatre; and (5) a description of intent. (MM)

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East-West Comparative Literature: India/Ireland, Rabindranath Tagore/W.B. Yeats

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Title: East-West Comparative Literature: India/Ireland, Rabindranath Tagore/W.B. Yeats

Objective: To introduce university-level students to the relationships between Eastern and Western literature, as well as to the significance of the cultural contexts in which literature is written and read, through the study of the work of two representatives of East and West, Rabindranath Tagore and W.B. Yeats.

Texts:

Chakravarty, Amiya, ed. A Tagore Reader. Boston: Beacon Press, 1966.
Nihalani, Paroo, R.K. Tongue, and Priya Hosali. Indian and British English: Handbook of Usage and Pronunciation. Delhi, India: Oxford University Press, 1985 (1979).

Yeats, W.B. The Collected Plays. London: MacMillan, 1966.
_____ The Collected Poems. London: MacMillan, 1967.
_____ Essays and Introductions. N.Y.: Collier Books, 1961.
_____ Mythologies. N.Y.: Collier Books, 1969.

On Reserve in the Library:

Hay, Stephen N. Asian Ideas of East and West: Tagore and His Critics in Japan, China, and India. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1970.
Tagore, Rabindranath. Nationalism. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 1973.
_____ The Post Office. Dublin, Ireland: Cuala Press, 1971 (reprint of 1918 edition).
_____, translated by Devabrata Mukerjee. Collected Works. N.Y.: Gordon Press.

Sequence of Lecture-Discussions:

Rabindranath Tagore and W.B. Yeats: Each author symbolized for the other his respective part of the world (East-West). To Tagore, Yeats revealed "the soul of Ireland through his individual soul"; to Yeats, Tagore's work made known "a whole people, a whole civilization, immeasurably strange to us." Their friendship lasted thirty-seven years; the history of their work and association demonstrates the value of cross-cultural literary studies, and a comparison between the two should prove very illuminating.

I. The Work:
. Indian influences (the Upanishads, Theosophy, Madame Blavatsky, Mohini Chatterjee, Tagore, Purohit Swami, Manmohan Ghose, et al.) on W.B. Yeats: scrutiny of selected texts.
. Tagore, Indian Philosophy, and the West: overview, selected texts.
. Shared themes: presence of the One in the many, reincarnation, unity of life, unlimited consciousness, prenatal memory, strong desire to find peace by living close to nature, real world an illusion/unreal/ephemeral, real life is dreaming, etc.: juxtaposition of selected texts by Tagore and Yeats.

II. The Cultural Contexts: India and Ireland:

. Parallels: Old Celtic Religion and the Religions of India
Traditions of Folk Art/Religion and Poetry as One
Mythology: Long Traditions of Romance
Literary Nationalism: Colonial/Post-Colonial
. The Language Question: ambiguity/ambivalence of an Irishman writing in English, and of an Indian writing in an imported/Western language; the complexities of translation from Sanskrit/Bengali into English; the paradox/validity of national literatures in foreign languages.

III. Tagore and Yeats, India and Ireland:

Tagore and Yeats played somewhat parallel roles in their respective countries, and these roles were inextricable from their lives as poets/writers and public men and from the cultures/countries that made them what they were and out of which they made themselves. Since the time of Tagore and Yeats, as well as in their own time, similar questions face India and Ireland: questions of identity, cultural autonomy, the articulation of the struggle against oppressive economic and political forces; efforts to deal with these issues inform both Irish writers and writers in Indian English.

Contemporary Irish and Indian writers may be studied as time permits.

Utilizing Foreign Students/Faculty as Resources in Comparative Literature Courses:

Irish and Indian nationals will be invited to read aloud examples of the work of W.B. Yeats and Rabindranath Tagore. Structuring this into the course as a classroom activity is of intrinsic as well as topical value.

Voices:
. Cultural expectations often condition what we hear; often the "expression on the face of the words" signifies as much as the words themselves.
. Hearing the work of Yeats interpreted by an Irishman/woman or the work of Tagore interpreted by an Indian conveys what it means to be foreign, sensitizes U.S. students to cultural differences/intonations, and serves as a vehicle for understanding the living voices of literature derived from oral traditions.

Cultural expertise:
. An individual from India or Ireland may take for granted the cultural context of his/her own national literature, yet nevertheless offer insights into the function of English in Irish/Indian society.
. Foreign students/faculty may also provide expertise on anything from the political charge certain themes possess in an Irish/Indian context to the history/meaning of particular English words/phrases when transposed into Irish/Indian culture.

Foreign students/faculty from India and Ireland have much to learn from one another, as well as to share with U.S. students/faculty, many of whom may themselves come from differing ethnic backgrounds.

Activities:

Films:
. "Yeats Country": short documentary on the background of Yeats's work--his youth in Sligo, associations at Coole Park and in the literary movement, and his part in Ireland's struggle for independence.
. Ghare Baire, Ray's film (with English sub-titles) on Tagore's novel The Home and the World.
. List of other Irish/Indian films available from the Consulate General of Ireland, the Boston Public Library, at other colleges/universities in the area, video rental outfits, and local PBS station.

Visual Arts:
. Facsimile of the Book of Kells; film of these hand-illuminated manuscripts of the Four Gospels.
. Reproductions of the broadsides by Jack Yeats (brother of the poet) and portraits by J.B. Yeats (father of the poet).
. Indian art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; the Harvard University Museums; and work by the Irish-born sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens.

Slides of Images/Symbols/Places in the Work of Rabindranath Tagore and W.B. Yeats:

Images/Symbols:
peahens
lotus
banyan tree
Himalayas
Ganges
temples
Brahma
dancers
musicians
costumes from different States of India
landscapes
Bay of Bengal
Yeats (of the West, for Tagore)
Tagore (of the East, for Yeats)
art/paintings alluded to in texts

Places:
Theosophical Society, Madras
Tagore's ancestral home and museum, Jorasanko, North Calcutta
Rabindra Bharati University
craftsmen making musical instruments
Thoor Ballylee/Ballylee Castle in Galway
Ben Bulben, Drumcliff churchyard, Sligo
Erasmus Smith High School, Metropolitan School of Art, Royal Hibernian Academy School, Dublin
Dublin Post Office, Abbey Theatre
Irish monastery
dolmens (pre-historic monuments)
scenes of London, Oxford, and so forth

Music/Dance/Theatre:
. Survey the local scene for performances by musicians visiting from India/Ireland or by recent immigrants from enclaves in Boston neighborhoods.
. Provide students with list of local Irish pubs and Indian restaurants where live music is sometimes played.
. Attend a production of an Irish play; students from colleges/universities with theatre majors occasionally produce several of Yeats's shorter plays.
. If any actors/musicians from India/Ireland performing locally, invite to class to speak about the arts/theatre in his/her/their country.
. Check advance Arts schedules in order to assign texts accordingly.

Other:
. Visit special exhibits passing through the Boston area, such as India: A Festival of Science.
. Scan local listings of lectures by visiting scholars/speakers on Indian/Irish subjects.

Evaluation:

In addition to greater knowledge of the work of Rabindranath Tagore and W.B. Yeats, it is to be hoped that students and invited guests will gain increased understanding of the cultural contexts in which literature is written and read, the East-West influences in comparative poetics and cultural relations, and the value of cross-cultural education in our multi-ethnic, multi-national, inter-dependent world.

U.S. students should come to recognize that literary history benefits from an appreciation of the cultural contexts in which it takes place, and cross-cultural histories of the world should enrich the discourse with which we discuss our global problems: to get beyond "doctrinaire provincialism," beyond "temporal and cultural parochialism," to define what is relevant from a wider perspective.

The extent to which students are enabled to see and to hear and to make sense of differences, to this extent the course--at least in limited and tentative ways--may succeed. Un-British/American English usage (especially in non-European/Western cultures) illustrates the cultural expertise necessary to understand literatures in imported languages; English words that have grown up again in other cultures reflect those cultures as well as the language itself. Utilizing foreign students/faculty as resources in courses on comparative literature should provide U.S. students with a variety of perspectives on the written/spoken word in English.

Furthermore, it would be gratifying to think that this course made students active participants in their own education on matters Irish/Indian; that they were motivated to search out opportunities to learn more on their own; and that interests and habits of "experiential learning" may follow them the rest of their days. Perhaps if enough of us find ways to become and remain mindful of the world beyond ourselves, then perhaps enough of us may be able to articulate an "epistemology with a future" (Bateson).

Both formative and summative evaluations should be solicited from all participants.

END

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